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ABSTRACT

A paradigmatic model of cultural ideology provides a context for understanding the relationship between decision-making and personal and cultural rationality. Cultural rules or heuristics exist which indicate that many decisions can be made on the basis of established strategy rather than continual analytical calculations. When an optimal solution to a problem does not exist, decisions may be aimed at a range of acceptable outcomes determined on the basis of past experiences, the achievements of others, and the degree to which one perceives himself as being in control of events. According to this theory, culture is an information system and a general heuristic model that individuals use as an intermediating device for interpreting, understanding, and interacting with the social and physical environments. Culture provides information and then organizes that information as individuals synthesize facts, experience, and inherited traditions into a world view. This model provides for creativity as a factor as individuals interpret their world view or cultural ideology and in so doing, helps explain the cultural variation necessary for evolution. Adjustments in systems of information, world view, and theory become necessary because, in the process of integrating new information or expectations, the current system is subject to increasing internal stress. Cultural change serves as an adjustment to the accumulation of information or experience which the current cultural system does not adequately account for. (LP)

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BEYOND DECISION MAKING: CULTURAL IDEOLOGY AS HEURISTIC PARADIGMATIC MODELS

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BEYOND DECISION MAKING:
CULTURAL IDEOLOGY AS HEURISTIC PARADIGMATIC MODELS

Recent studies in decision making and social exchange have placed renewed stress on the assumption of rationality (Barlett 1980; Gergen et al 1980; Kaperer 1976; Peoples 1982; Schelling 1978). However, if we assume individuals are rational, we are faced with the problem of accepting beliefs and behaviors as being rational which appear to us, as outside observers, to be irrational or nonrational.

One way to deal with this problem is to argue that individuals are rational within the context of their beliefs and cultural knowledge. This position has been taken by Evans Pritchard (1935), I.C. Jarvie (1964), as well as by Carl Hempel (1959b). But this leaves us with a very real conflict, the same conflict which, I believe, was the underlying crux of the formalist/substantivist debate which was started in economic anthropology. Can all behavior be reduced to rational motivations and choices, or is culture sometimes an alternate determinant of behavior which cannot readily be reduced to mechanical rationality? That culture is indeed a determinant of behavior is a very basic axiom of anthropology. But if individuals are rational within the context of their cultural knowledge and beliefs, how do we account for that context? And especially how do we do so without reifying the concept of culture and treating it like some mystical vitalistic force that is self-regulating and

self-serving (Elster 1979; Hempel 1959a; Murdock 1971; also cf. Rappaport 1968:4).

Some social exchange theorists have suggested that patterned cultural behavior can be explained as an epiphenomenon of individuals making similar rational decisions under similar circumstances (Thibaut and Kelly 1959; Barth 1966; Heath 1976; Peoples 1982). This allows us to account for culture if we are willing to assume that all behavior patterns are established and negotiated through interaction and rational deliberation. In such a model culture is reduced to a by-product of aggressive individual choice. It does not take into account that culture itself can be a source of appropriate behavior; it also leaves the nagging problem of accounting for beliefs systems, such as religion or magic, that seem to have no rational basis. Religious ideology may even openly challenge the concept of rationality, arguing that belief or faith are only true when there is no empirical basis for the belief. Thus the assumption of rationality is inadequate to explain certain aspects of culture.

This criticism of rational action approaches has also been made by Robert Paine (1972) using Blau's (1964) distinction between "extrinsic values " which are generated by the very act of exchange (much like price formation in economic theory) and "intrinsic values"--that is, values which exist independently of the exchange process. Intrinsic values are normative in the sense that they are

derived from cultural notions about the appropriateness of a choice or exchange, as well as the appropriateness of a goal. An intrinsic value may be a religious belief, an ethical or moral conviction, or a belief that a particular behavior indicates prestige. To better understand this conflict between extrinsic values which are rooted in rational exchange, and intrinsic values which are culturally defined, we need to go beyond the rationality assumption, beyond decision making, and look at culture as an information system.

Psychological studies of decision making in the last ten years also challenge a strong, even mechanical assumption of rationality. These studies, particularly those of Tversky and Kahneman (1974, 1973, Kahneman and Tversky 1973) indicate that individuals make judgments and evaluate probabilities in ways that simplify information. For example, the more recently one has seen or experienced an event (such as a house burning down) the more one inflates the probability of the event. Three common heuristics for evaluating probability are 1) availability (an example of which I have just given) 2) anchoring and adjustment, or the tendency to cluster estimates around a preestablished point, and 3) representativeness, or evaluating probability based on the similarity of event A to a class of events or processes B (Tversky and Kahneman 1974).

These heuristics involve simplifying information and

the task of estimating probability. But I have also found in the decision making literature "heuristics" which are of a different nature. For example, Knalf and Burkett (1975) found that surgeons use general treatment philosophies based more on clinical experiences than on scientific opinion. Such heuristics are different from "psychological heuristics." They are actually cultural rules, or I would argue, "cultural heuristics." The existance of cultural heuristics indicates that many decisions may be made based on an established strategy rather than continual analytical calculations. As such, hueristics are generally useful but may lead to occasional, but systematic errors.

This means that cultural heuristics may lead to less than optimal decisions--a possibility which clashes with the rationality assumption. How do we model less than optimal decisions? The economist Herbert Simon developed a choice model which indicates that decisions may actually be aimed at a range of acceptable outcomes rather than "the" optimal solution. The model is more realistic in that it recognizes that the necessary information for an optimal decision may be too costly to obtain, or may involve unknown costs. Given that uncertainty exists, one cannot designate an optimal solution, but rather one establishes a lower boundary, anything above which constitutes a "satisficing"--that is, a satisfactory--outcome (Simon 1955,1978).

By using a "satisficing" as opposed to an "optimizing" model we introduce "relativity" into decision making which

is a first step toward cultural relativity. What is considered a satisfactory outcome depends--as Thibaut and Kelly (1959) pointed out 30 years ago--on expectations that are the distillation of 1) past experiences, 2) the achievements of other persons one comes in contact with and 3) the degree to which one perceives themselves to have control over events (that is, the degree to which individuals have causal responsibility for their situations. This perception of control vs. actual control can be important: if individuals perceive themselves to have little control over a situation, they tend to downgrade or otherwise readjust their expectations.)

So far, I have indicated that "cultural heuristics" exist which produce "satisfactory" effectiveness in handling decisions. We need to go further, however, to develop the notion that culture is an information system and a general heuristic model that individuals use as an intermediating devise for interpreting, understanding, and interacting with the social and physical environments. Culture not only provides information and "heuristics," it also organizes that information as individuals synthesize facts, experience, and inherited cultural traditions into a world view. Hence, as Horton (1970) suggests, an individual's personal culture is somewhat of a "theory" as to how the world works. Or to borrow a concept from Thomas Kuhn (1970) an individual's personal culture is a paradigmatic model. And I think that certain points which Kuhn makes

about science (as a subculture) are true of all cultural paradigms. A paradigmatic model not only accounts for new information; it also suggests new information and new concepts. In other words, it provides for creativity as a factor as individuals interpret their world view or cultural ideology. The significance of including individual creativity in a model of culture is critical if we are to explain the cultural variation necessary for evolution. This creativity and the stochastic, or random variation it produces allows us to avoid models of behavior that are naively mechanical and deterministic.

The concept of paradigmatic modeling has already been adapted by Barbour (1974), Guthrie (1980) and others to argue that religious thought is indeed a way of viewing the world that has meaning and relevance to daily experience. I am suggesting that religion and science are merely specific examples of the attempt to produce useful and meaningful paradigmatic models; all cultural traditions can be seen as heuristic models of the world that aid in adaptation. (Wallace (1972) has also applied the concept of paradigm change to culture, but his usage seems to be much more limited and does not seem to stress individual choice in interpreting and restructuring cultural paradigms.)

Kuhn's concept of paradigm change is also appropriate in that it indicates that the forces which normally stimulate change are contingent upon the adequacy of the

current relevant paradigm. In terms of a cultural paradigm, it is the ability of the paradigm to lead to satisfactory or satisficing behavior that determines adequacy.

By looking at culture as a source of information, it is clear that we are talking about culture as first a mental phenomenon and secondarily as a material manifestation. I am thus inclined to refer to the total information, knowledge, beliefs, and notions that make up an individual's world view as their cultural ideology. I have suggested that this ideology includes not only "heuristics" for appropriate behavior or decisions but also complexes of ideas that individuals use to organize and attempt to account for information. I also concur with Anthony Wallace (1961) and Richard Salisbury (1976) in the conviction that each individual's personal culture is different and that cultural traditions are shared only to the extent that individuals share common cultural inheritances, or are exposed to similar experiences, information and situations and arrive at similar cultural notions. This perspective rejects the abstract, monolithic, and unrealistic view of culture as a superorganic entity which seeks system equilibrium.

This view of culture as information and ideology involves rationality and empiricism on the part of individuals, but it also involves individuals' attempts to organize this information into a useful and meaningful model of the world. In doing so, they draw from pre-existing cultural notions which they inherit and interpret based upon

their own experiences, new information, and interaction with others. In the process of organizing ideas into ideological complexes, the individual goes beyond mere rationality. As a useful way of viewing the world, cultural ideology is indeed somewhat analogous to theory, as Horton suggests. Horton (1970) presents "traditional African thought" as a kind of theoretical explanation of phenomena, different from scientific theory in that it is a closed view of the world, but like all theory in that it attempts to explain phenomena that can not be explained in normal "common sensical" terms.

If we consider cultural ideology to be paradigmatic models that provide "satisficing" models for appropriate modes of behavior, we must also acknowledge the non-rational tendencies of ideology. Perhaps the most powerful non-rational attribute of a cultural ideology is the tendency to become self-reifying. In other words, a particular way of viewing the world is legitimized by defining certain complexes of ideas as natural, "real", or divinely established. Religious beliefs are the most obvious example of this. They tend not only to dictate what is real, but also invoke codes of moral and ethical conduct which are supported by a supernatural decree or by reference to what is believed natural or right. Dogmatic belief in a cultural ideology also leads to the suppression of certain information that might prove contradictory. Evans-Pritchard's Azande would never ask the poison oracle whether it was fake or not to test its validity. Belief in the

"realness" of the poison oracle's power precludes such a question (Evans-Pritchard 1935). Belief in the inherent rightness of any cultural system involves reification when information that challenges this rightness is dismissed, ignored, or discredited. Thus, as Barbour (1974) has argued, the evaluation of any paradigmatic model partly depends on independent objective criteria and partly on the paradigmatic model itself insomuch as it defines what is considered important, significant and right.

If cultural ideology provides "satisficing" models of the world that individuals use, how do we explain seemingly dysfunctional traits? And if individuals are sensitive to conflict and inconsistence, as the rationality assumption tells us they should be, why do we find occasional but striking contradiction and inconsistence?

Adjusting an ideological model to incorporate new information is itself a choice process. Therefore, it is not simply a matter of accumulating new facts and ideas, or exchanging new bottles for old wine skins. It may seem like a clear advantage in accepting a new drug into a system of medicine when westerners believe that they have proven its effectiveness. But as anthropologists we know this is not always the case. First of all, what works within one system may interfere with another. Perhaps more significant, however, there may be a greater and more costly ideological choice between accepting either a native medical system or

the western one. (The conflict can sometimes be meliorated if we can help the native to unite two world views rather than force a difficult choice between two worlds.) The intangible costs of ideological adjustment and consideration of social relations may consciously or even unconsciously render an apparently clear choice not so clear. No world view can resolve all informational and ideological conflict. The disutility of one choice may not be significant or obvious enough to cause individuals to alter the assumptions and beliefs the decision was based on. It is also possible for cultural ideologies to prove satisficing in most areas of importance while having disutility in a few areas. Therefore in the case of ideological complexes (where specific assumptions are not really subject to question without challenging the whole or many related assumptions) it may be necessary to consider the utility of the whole. Just as with a scientific paradigm, its usefulness and its limitations must be weighed. I do think there is a limit to the amount of contradiction or disutility that individuals will tolerate. Such a limit, of course, is relative. Satisfaction with a paradigm, as with any other behavioral decision, is a function of expectations.

As in scientific paradigms, adjustments in systems of information, world view, and theory become necessary because in the process of gradually integrating new information or new expectations, the current system is

subject to increasing internal stress. In other words, cultural change may serve as an adjustment to the accumulation of information and experiences which the current cultural system does not adequately account for. Perhaps the least understood part of culture change is not innovation or exposure to new ideas, but rather how individuals sift through new information and new ideas and reject them or integrate them into their cultural baggage as they adjust and restructure the paradigmatic models which make up their personal cultures. Also, not all individuals in a culture will make ideological adjustments at the same time, due to their different experiences, expectations, and interests in the status quo. Thus we need not assume that paradigm change means revolution. Rather it involves changes in personal culture which taken as a whole, emerge as the large patterns we normally refer to as culture.

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